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Blessings and Jackpots

John 6:24-35

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Perhaps you've noticed how organizations and businesses that are headed by Christians have been marketing their products and services towards Christians. There is the perception among businesses that Christian people will purchase stuff that says its Christian. Now, I know some fine Christian men and women in this congregation who provide services, and I would be inclined to go to them for their services because I know their character, and I believe that Christ in their lives has emerged and affects the way they do business. Yet, in most cases, the service they provide isn't really touched by Christ, the service or product isn't more Christ-centered because the person professes faith in Christ. And here's the danger for any of us: how to live out our faith in Jesus Christ and allow that faith to impact our work world without allowing our work world to define our faith.

This is a limited example, but at the most recent PromiseKeepers stadium event at Arco Arena a while back, there were hundreds of businesses hawking their wares to the mostly Christian crowds. The official PK leadership endorsed most of these and ran a series of unseemly commercials for them by comments from the central microphone or by way of the large LCD monitors around the place. The assumption was that since these products stem from organizations who have Christian men in charge, if you purchase from them, you are helping your brother in Christ be a success in the world. But the offers mostly had the same ring to them that you would get if the offers came from any number of secular mail order catalogs - or anyone, for that matter, who had access to you, let alone special access.

I read about a slicked up church supply salesman in a three piece suit who came to a pastor's office to try to sell him some Bible games for the youth group. The top of the line game was called 'Dollars and Sense." It was a board game, much like Monopoly, and the salesman said it was great at teaching children about "Christian economics." The way it worked was, if players landed on a square labeled 'college graduate,' they received a certain sum of money, and if they landed on the square named 'middle level executive,' they received a greater sum of money. But if they were lucky enough to land on the square labeled 'company president,' they would get a very large sum indeed.

Regardless of the amount of money they received, however, if they gave 10% to the 'church' square on the board (and here's the alleged lesson in Christian economics), they would reap a bonanza IF they *also* landed on the 'showers of blessings square,' being showered in this case with all the money in the game's jackpot.

The pastor told the salesman he thought this was a crass lesson to teach a child, that the word 'blessings' is so easily associated with the word 'jackpot.' But the salesman didn't flinch. He looked at the pastor straight in the eye and said: "Yes, Reverend, but isn't that the way the world works?"

And I suppose the salesman is right - that IS the way the world works. It's just not God's way, and I want us this morning to think on this for a moment. We might say we're hungry for a blessing, when what we really want is a jackpot. Have you ever thought of winning the lottery? I have. I have thought what I would do if I gained such a blessing ... er ... jackpot. Because that's what the lottery is, a jackpot.

Blessings come as a sign of grace. They are gifts that deepen and enrich our humanity. But jackpots come as a sign of luck, windfalls that give us more of what most people are after - fame, power, fortune. A child in an urban school in Atlantic City who has a passionate and caring teacher has received a blessing. A high roller in the casino down the street who comes up big at the roulette table has received a jackpot. Which would you choose? The passion of learning or a few lucky strikes at the roulette wheel? It's OK ... this is the time when you can say to me, 'Yes, Reverend, but isn't that the way the world works?'

What about these crowds in John 6? Some of these people were in the crowd of 5,000 which Jesus had (miraculously) fed in the first verses of John 6, and had followed him all the way to Capernaum. At first, we are impressed by their spiritual earnestness. We note how they want to be near Jesus. That's good. That's the spirit! That's what we want too. They thirst for his teaching. They long to deepen their encounter with God. They *seem* hungry for a blessing.

Actually, no. Jesus discerns their true motive and calls it as he sees it. He tells them: "You're not looking for me because of the signs of God's presence ... you're looking for me because you got well fed on the mountain." In other words, Jesus looks right at these people and tells them they aren't after a blessing, they're after a jackpot. Oh, for the Jesus who is always comfortable! Sorry, he never was there, and those who made that phony Jesus up aren't preaching to you here ☺ !

Now, I want to ask you to stay with me here because it's a bit more complicated than it appears. This isn't just and only a story of people who got their bellies filled but who cared nothing for the life of faith, or of people who come to church for the potluck but not for the preaching. It's not a simple story contrasting people who come to church for business contacts rather than to sing praises to God. Not at all. The crowd believes it is following Jesus for good and true religious reasons. When they had been fed on the mountain, they said of one accord: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). So there is some connectivity to faith.

So why is it that Jesus challenges their motives? Well, Jesus perceives that the crowd is following him because he can make their lives better - but on *their* terms and in *their* categories. Jesus wants to give them life; they want an improved lifestyle. Understanding the difference between the two is the key to understanding why Jesus is being challenging here. And it's the difference between blessing and jackpot.

I knew a stockbroker once who told me that when the market was down, He would read the Bible. There it is clearly - the confusion of a blessing and a jackpot. The stockbroker thought he was doing a righteous thing, reading the Bible when the Dow dropped. But his presumption was that the task of religion or, even worse, God's job, is to make his life better, to hold him together when the market faltered, or even to turn the bears into bulls. And that *isn't* God's job, at least not according to Jesus!

We do exactly the same thing when we assume that God's role is to make the life we have designed and planned, work out

smoothly. We say: "Oh God, I have these plans. Make them work out smoothly." That's not a blessing - that's a jackpot. Jesus is not a short-order cook preparing food to suit our whims. He offers not food that perishes but food that endures for eternal life! And the food that endures for eternal life is, of course, Jesus himself. "I am the bread of life" he tells the crowd. Not perishable bread that feeds a passing whim but the nourishment of God that feeds our souls. This is not bread that *we* are supposed to knead and bake, *as if we could!* This is bread that God gives us as a gift. When the crowd, continuing to be confused, asked Jesus: 'What must we do to perform the works of God?,' he says (in effect), 'You *cannot* 'perform' the work of God. It will transform you, but you can't perform it. *God performs the work of God*. Your 'work' is to believe it, receive it ... and live it."

I'm convinced that this misunderstanding of blessing, or the confusion between blessing and jackpot, is of paramount importance in our life together. There are people here this morning who want God to make their lives better, not take their lives and transform them. These people, some of you, need to hear it said clearly - this isn't the way it works. This isn't what God does. This isn't what the church is about. What God wants is for you to accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior and allow him to run your life. Jesus is the bread of life but you can't just take one convenient bite and put the loaf back in the pantry.

Learning to be good people is good. Being generous is good. But our generosity will not save us. The only thing that can save us is that our God is a generous God who offers forgiveness for our sins - sins that are all the more powerful because we can't will our way out of them. We are caught. God, however, has freed us from our 'caughtness' through Jesus Christ. The question is whether you are willing to accept into your life the Bread that brings eternal life. Salvation won't happen to you accidentally and it has nothing to do with luck. Will you or will you not come now to Jesus? If you will, if you will accept Jesus as your savior, if you will receive a blessing not of your own making, then come up, come right up here, right now, as I pray.

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